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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE STORY OF JAMES CORBIN, A SOLDIER OF FORT DEARBORN

Among the soldiers of the Fort Dearborn garrison which was overwhelmed by the savages on August 15, 1812, were James and Fielding Corbin. Probably the two men were brothers, although I have found no positive evidence to this effect. Both men survived the battle and massacre, and both, after almost two years of Indian and British captivity, were restored to their country. At the moment of their restoration, however, they disappeared from the view of recorded history, apparently for all time. Humble Americans they were, swallowed in the mass of their countrymen. Some years ago I made a diligent effort to collect all the existing sources of information concerning the two Corbins. Since then I have unearthed in the pension office at Washington the story of James Corbin's life which follows, together with a number of additional items of information concerning him. Aside from the human interest which attaches to Corbin's story there are several features which combine to make it an interesting addition to the scanty mass of source literature pertaining to the first Fort Dearborn. Although not written down until 1826, and then from the dictation of an illiterate man, it is evident to one familiar with the literature of the subject already extant that the writer's own assertion of the reliability of his story is amply justified. Told from memory by one who had been totally cut off, since the termination of his captivity, from knowledge of, or association with his fellows, his story tallies closely with our other sources of information, in so far as it deals with facts elsewhere familiar to us. Unless the author had been possessed of a good memory and a desire to tell the truth this close correspondence would have been impossible. The fact that it exists affords an excellent reason for crediting the statements constituting the major portion of Corbin's story, which we have no means of checking by comparison with other testimony. Assuming, then, the general reliability

of the narrative, it affords one more eye-witness account of the events and conditions attending the Fort Dearborn massacre. Concerning these conditions it is illuminative both by reason of what it says and what it omits to say. There is no word of criticism of Captain Heald, no mention of any abnormal rôle played by Lieutenant Helm and John Kinzie such as the former himself claimed, and the relatives of the latter have claimed for him. Contrary to the contentions of the author of *Wau Bun* and her numerous followers, it is affirmed that a council of the officers was held "to consult on what course should be pursued." Nor is it entirely without significance that one who had spent nine years at Fort Dearborn, characterizes John Kinzie as "an Englishman." Finally, Corbin was a member of by far the largest group of Fort Dearborn captives who returned to civilization. His detailed story of his experiences may be taken as representing to a large extent those of the other members of the group to which he belonged.

James Corbin is one of our country's unsung heroes. That he did a man's part in the long struggle between civilization and savagery is plain. Yet the requital of his services by the nation for which he suffered so much was niggardly enough. Returning to civil life after more than a decade of military service and nearly two years of frightful captivity, he was compelled to enlist again in order to escape starvation. A few years later the fact of this final enlistment was used as an excuse to drop him from the pension rolls, the argument being, apparently, that the physical condition of a person who could gain admission to the army could not have been such as to entitle him to a pension. Still later, when he sought to have a new pension granted the fact that he was not killed by the Indians was gravely adduced against him; the argument this time being to the effect that the Indians kill their wounded captives, and since they did not kill Corbin he could not have been wounded in the battle as he claimed. Fortunately for the humble soldier, he found an able advocate in the person of James Barbour, secretary of war, a fellow Virginian. He showed that Corbin had been wounded while engaged in the military service, and whether acquired in the Fort Dearborn massacre or elsewhere his wounds rendered his claim for a pension equally strong. The presump-

tion that as a wounded captive he should have been killed by the Indians was overcome by showing that he was a blacksmith and the natives had spared him because Pierre Le Claire, the Chicago half-breed, had represented to them that he would be useful to sharpen their hatchets and tomahawks. In December, 1826, a pension of four dollars a month was granted Corbin, and twenty years later this pittance was doubled. He was living in Virginia when the pension was granted, and here he seems to have spent the remainder of his life. The last trace I have found of him is an affidavit concerning the loss of his pension certificate, which shows that in January, 1855, he was still living in Harrison county, Virginia.

M. M. QUAIFFE

“STATEMENT OF JAMES CORBIN OF THE COUNTY OF CULPEPER AND STATE OF VIRGINIA, RESPECTING HIS ENLISTMENT IN THE ARMY OF THE UNITED STATES AND HIS SERVICE AND SUFFERINGS IN THE SAME.

I enlisted on the 6th day of March 1801 in the army of the United States at Romney in Virginia under Lieut. Bell, joined the general rendezvous at Pittsburgh (or Fort Pitt then so called) on the following month of May and was attached to a company commanded by Capt. Bird belonging to the 1st Regt U. S. Infantry all under the command of Gen^l Wilkinson, and from Pittsburgh was marched to Fort Presqueisle in the course of the same year; where the detachment quartered during the winter, and in the spring of 1802 we were shipped to Detroit. We lay in garrison at Detroit from the spring of our arrival there untill July, 1803. Col. Hamtramck the commandant at Detroit died and was buried the day before the detachment under the command of Capt. John Whistler left there for Chicago to erect a fort at that place which was afterwards called fort Dearbourn.¹ This detachment consisted of a captain's company to which I was detailed commanded as before stated by Capt. Whistler. I assisted in constructing that fortress at the point of Lake Michigan, where I served out my first enlistment years; and reenlisted

¹ Colonel John Hamtramck was a veteran soldier. He served throughout the revolution and at its close continued in the army, rising at length to the rank of colonel. For many years prior to his death he had been stationed on the north-western frontier. He died April 11, 1803. Unless it is intended to refer to the preliminary detail of men which Captain Whistler led to Chicago to gather information concerning the route and the situation there, Corbin's statement as to the period of time between Hamtramck's death and Whistler's departure for Chicago is incorrect. The company of troops which went to establish the new fort left Detroit on July 14, 1803, three months after Hamtramck's death.

under Capt. Whistler for five years in the army of the United States, which five years I served at fort Dearbourn, and upon the expiration of the second term of five Years I again reenlisted under Capt. Whistler² for five years in the Service of the United States. In the year 1811 Capt. Whistler left us for Detroit, and Capt. Nathan Heil from fort Wayne assumed the command. We were informed of the declaration of War between the United States and Great Britain, which was read upon parade by the commanding officer, and orders had been received from Genl Hull to evacuate the fort and march to fort Wayne. Capt. Wells arrived a few days before the fort was evacuated by the garrison, from fort Wayne; with him thirty miami indians to assist us in getting to fort Wayne. The day before we left the fort there was a council of the officers held to consult on what course should be pursued, whether we should leave the fort or not. The conduct of the indians around us, had excited fears that all was not well; an indian that day shot at and wounded an ox that was to assist in drawing the baggage, very near the captain, and we had great fears on account of the Prophets indians who we knew were between us and fort Wayne. It was determined to endeavour to strengthen the alliance between us and the indians around us, and to engage them to escort us to fort Wayne which Capt. Wells accordingly did, the number between six hundred and seven hundred. Arrangements were made to leave the fort on the morning of the 15th August, 1812, and on marching out of the fort the indians whose camp was in sight and around the fort and who we expected to march with us as agreed upon, were not one of their warriors to be seen. We marched about two miles from the fort, when we were attacked by them in full force and after fighting for some time Capt. Heil finding that it was impossible to resist such a force with such means, having only seventeen men left, and some of them badly wounded, surrendered to the indians hoping that they would give us quarters, and directed us to ground our arms. We were taken back towards the fort where the indians massacred five of our men that had not been wounded and two that were wounded. I had received during the engagement a rifle shot that cut the leader of my right heel in to, a shot which passed through my left thigh, and a ball in my hip which has never been extracted, and a deep tomahawk wound in my right shoulder.³ Capt Wells was killed in the en-

² The last Fort Dearborn muster roll, for May 31, 1812, shows that Corbin's current enlistment dated from October 2, 1810. For it see Quaife, *Chicago and the old northwest, 1673-1835* (Chicago, 1913), 425-27. At this time Captain Nathan Heald was in command at Fort Dearborn, having succeeded Whistler the preceding April.

³ A physician's certificate July 10, 1826, accompanying Corbin's application for a pension states that he has the mark of a gunshot wound on the tendon of Achilles,

gagement and also ensign Ronan, and the surgion whose name I have forgotten. he had not been with us but for a short period.⁴ Capt Heil was badly wounded in both arms, also Lieut. Helm and both taken prisoners.⁵ The night after the battle Capt. Wells was cut to pieces, his heart and liver roasted and eaten by the savages. The next morning the indians having destroyed the fort by fire, started with the remaining prisoners into the Illinois country, except Capt. Heil who was purchased by our sutler John Kinsey an Englishman.⁶ The morning after leaving the fort the indians killed two of our men who were wounded and appeared to have become exhausted. All the wounded prisoners were placed on horseback. Upon the arrival of the indians at their town the prisoners that could get to the cornfield were allowed to get what corn they could eat. I was unable to walk, and had to subsist upon the kindness of savages, which frequently allowed me to go days and nights without food. Lieut. Helm remained only two days at the indian town, when he was taken down the Illinois river. I have heard that he was living but have never seen him since. After I recovered, so that I was enabled to walk, I was taken by an indian Squaw and boy to go in pursuit of some sugar kettles which the indians had used the spring before in making sugar. (this was during the middle of the winter, — heavy snow upon the ground, clothed with a pair of indian leggings, an old breach clout, and a worn out soldiers vest.) and being very weak and compelled to carry the pack, I gave out and could not travel any further and was left in the wilderness by them, and remained there seven days & eight nights without any sustenance whatever, and by crawling on my hands and knees obtained wood for my fire which kept me from freesing to death. In this situation on the eighth day in the morning, I was found by a Kickapoo indian and squaw, placed on a horse and carried to their encampment. I remained with them untill their warriors started to Detroit to attack Gen'l Harrison. they took me along and passed by the village of the Pottawattomies who had first taken me, and gave me to the same squaw who had left me in the wilderness. I remained with them some another through the left thigh, another in the right hip and a sear on the shoulder which he claims to have been caused by a blow from a tomahawk; in consequence of all which it is certified that he is "one-half" disabled from performing manual labor.

⁴ The surgeon's name was Isaac Van Voohris. He enlisted in March, 1811, and came to Fort Dearborn the ensuing summer.

⁵ Heald was shot twice, through the arm and in the thigh. The latter wound proved exceedingly serious. Lieutenant Helm's wound was slight — like one of Corbin's, in the heel.

⁶ Captain Heald was ransomed by Jean Baptiste Chandonnai, a half-breed, who may have been in Kinzie's employ at this time.

length of time and was purchased by a French trader by the name of Bisson.⁷ As soon as the ice cleared from the Lake (Michigan) he took me by water to Mackinaw and gave me to Capt. Dixon⁸ the commandant of the northern indians, and Englishman and interpreter, who transferred me to Capt. Robinson the English commandant at Mackinaw, who sent me to Malden in company with four men, two women and some children who had been taken prisoners with me at fort Dearbourn. We remained at Malden sometimes in prison and sometimes aboard of a prison ship untill Commodore Perry captured the british fleet upon lake Erie, when we were taken up Lake Sinclair to the mouth of the river Thames, landed and marched to Kingston by land where we were shipped to Montreal, remained there a few days and was put aboard of a steam boat and carried to Quebec. I remained at Quebec during the winter. when I arrived there, [I] was destitute of any clothing except an indians breach clout and the vest which was in rags, bearfoot & without hat or blanket. Col. Gardner or Garner (his name sounded to me as Garner) agent for prisoners of war, furnished me with a suit of clothes and while I was at Quebec I drew four dollars pay. I was taken from Quebec up the st. Lawrence river, by a british guard in company with eighty or a hundred prisoners to little Chasy on Lake Champlain and from thence to Plattsburgh and there remained untill I was discharged by Col Pinkney by the certificate of a surgeon a Doct. Wheaton who examined me and pronounced me unfit for Service. I could walk with the assistance of a stick which had been my constant companion from my first being able to walk after receiving my wounds, using it at times as a crutch and stick. I had at the time of my discharge recovered so much as to be able nearly to travel without its assistance. Col Pinkney upon my receiving

⁷ This man, evidently a British sympathizer, spent the winter of 1812-13 at Chicago in a trading partnership with one Depain. The partners ransomed other prisoners besides Corbin, including Mrs. Lee and her child and (probably) Mrs. Cooper or Burns. Doubtless they were commissioned to this work by Robert Dickson, British-Indian leader in the northwest at the time; in March, 1813, he came to Chicago on a mission to rouse the western Indians in support of the British cause, and having learned that numerous members of the Fort Dearborn garrison and settlement were still alive, captives in the hands of the Indians, instituted measures to secure their release. Buison is probably to be identified with the "Beeson" of Gurdon S. Hubbard's autobiography. Hubbard describes him as a venerable man who had long (in 1818) been a trader on the Illinois river, and who was well and favorably known by the Indians.

⁸ Robert Dickson. From Chicago, where he was on March 22, 1813, Dickson had passed on to the Mississippi and early in June was back at Mackinac at the head of 600 warriors, raised for the fighting on the Detroit and Lake Erie frontier. The Fort Dearborn captives, collected at Chicago and brought on to Mackinac in pursuance of his orders, apparently, were immediately turned over by him to the custody of the local commandant for forwarding to Malden.

my discharge told me he would endeavour to get me allowed five months pay at Burlington to which place I went and drew five months pay. the paymaster claimed of me payment for the clothes furnished me by Col Gardner at Quebec saying that Col Gardner had furnished them at his own expense and that he must not loose. After deducting the amount charged me for clothing furnished at Quebec I had remaining between eight or ten dollars to carry me home a distance I supposed of eight hundred miles and at that time inabled to travel ten miles a day and give half a dollar for every meal I eat. Three days before I arrived at Albany I was without money and the means of support and was in a situation to suffer and perish with cold, being without money and bare of clothing, next akin to naked, never having received from any source clothing from the time of my being made a prisoner by the indians up to the period I am speaking of, with the exception of what I got at Quebec. I went to the Commandant at Greenbush and represented my situation, and asked for a provision return for eight days. he told me that he would grant me one for four days, and which I did not get. In this situation, I found myself under the necessity of doing something to procure the means of prolonging life and satiate the cravings of hunger, which had been sometimes allayed by the hand of charity. I return^d to Albany and went to the recruiting rendezvous to ask of the soldiers something to eat, judging that they would feel & sympathise in the distressed condition of an old soldier, who had served his country thirteen years, and who was by that time worn down with service and wounds and compelled to ask a scanty pittance of bread to support life. I did not ask in vain; they supplied my wants for the moment and gave me something to eat. I gave them a brief sketch of my service and sufferings, and was solicited to remain with them. My situation was such as to force me to pursue any honest course that presented itself to procure bread and the profession of arms which had been my trade from long service, was the one which I from inclination was the best adapted to follow. Thus necessity pressed me into the service again; I informed a noncommissioned officer who seemed to have taken an interest in my situation and who seemed to be anxious that I should enlist to procure bread that I was fearfull to reenlist on account of my having been discharged from disability, and that I might do wrong provided the recruiting officer would enlist me in the situation in which I was—that I had with me the Colonel's discharge and the doctor's certificate upon which it was given; he went to Capt Clark [and] represented my situation. Capt. Clark came to me and informed [me] that if I wish^d to enlist he would advise me to do so, rather than starve to death, that if I would give him my discharge and certificate which he would most assuredly return to me when

I wanted them that there would be no difficulty and that he would keep me at the recruiting rendezvous untill I should be enabled to march. I accordingly enlisted, served about three months at the recruiting rendezvous before the expiration of war, doing no duty whatever and was discharged with means to travel home. Capt. Clark lost my certificate and discharge, [but] accidentally meeting with Doctor Wheaton at Utica and representing the fact supported by Capt. Clark, who stated to him how it occurred, [he] renewed the certificate, which has been lodged in the pension office. I have in this statement been compelled to draw on my memory the only record I have for dates, names or circumstances, being unable to read or write. I may possibly in the names and dates err, but in the statement of events which occurred to me I speak positively and err not. I have given the history of occurrences that they may be contrasted with publick documents, and if they are not supported by them, I am willing to be taken for one that propagates falsehood. I know of no person whatever by whom I could prove my enlistment or my service up to the time of being wounded, that I could find to any certainty, the whole of our detachment being killed I suppose with the exception of Lieut. Helm and the six persons who were sent with me from Mackinaw by either of whom I could prove the fact of being wounded at the place and manner stated. I was placed upon the pension list and expected to have been measurably remunerated for my wounds and sufferings which I rec^d in the Service of my Country, but was stricken from it as will be seen by reference to a letter of the then Secretary of War of the 1st February 1820, and for reasons stated in the same. I will again say that the reason which induced me to enlist after being discharged was the want of bread and in which I hope to be believed by the proper Department. I am now forty-two years old, thirteen of which has been devoted to the service of my country. Married since I left the army, a wife and four Small children to support, by my own exertion. I humbly ask a reexamination of my claim to a pension by the Secretary of War, and of back pay as a pensioner from the time of receiving my wounds; as in the benevolence of my country provision has been made for the wounded and disabled soldier; that I may receive that allowance which the degree of my disability justly entitles me to, from scars thus honorably received.

his
James X Corben
mark
July 8th 1826''

LETTER OF THOMAS FORSYTH CONCERNING JAMES CORBIN

The letter of Thomas Forsyth which follows is also contained among the papers of James Corbin in the pension bureau. It seems worthy of printing both for the corroboration it gives of Corbin's statements concerning his captivity, and for the general information it conveys concerning events subsequent to the Fort Dearborn massacre.

“ST LOUIS

9th December 1826

Sir — Your letter of the 3^d ult respecting James Corben formerly of the army of the U. States came to hand a few days ago, and I hasten to answer it.

previous to the late war I seen James & Fielding Corben doing duty as soldiers at Fort Dearborn (Chicago). When I heard of the intention of the Indians to make war against the citizens of the United States I hurried from my place of residence (then at Peoria on Illinois River) to Chicago. On the 16th of August I met a large party of Indians (no great distance from Chicago) with horses loaded with goods &c and several soldiers of the garrison of Fort Dearborn as prisoners. Among the number was James Corben on horseback and Fielding Corben on foot carrying a drum. On meeting the Indians I got into conversation with two or three of them, while the others with their prisoners continued on towards their village at Sandy Creek (River aux Sables). On my arrival (same day) at Chicago I found Mr Kinsie & family all well at home. Mr Kinsie and Perish (the half blood that Corben speaks of) give me every information about the massacre of the troops & citizens and particularly about Captain William Wells of Fort Wayne, telling me who was killed, wounded & taken prisoners and if I mistake not Perish told me James Corben was wounded. In the month of April 1813 I was at Sandy Creek (River aux Sable) village. I there seen James Corben & a Corporal Bowen (a very tall man)¹ as prisoners among the Indians. The first day of my arrival at that village I was in a very critical situation, the Kickapoo Indians wishing to take myself & my men prisoners and send us to the British at Makinaw, but the Potawatimie Indians would not hear to any such proposition, and I remained three or four days at that place.

previous to my departure from Sandy Creek I spoke to a Potawatimie

¹ According to a physician's certificate in the pension bureau, Bowen was six feet three inches in height. For a statement concerning his share in the battle see *MISSISSIPPI VALLEY HISTORICAL REVIEW*, 1: 572-573.

chief named Gomo² about ransoming J. Corben & Bowen, and requested his assistance, stating to him that I had no goods then with me, but would fulfil any promise I would make to him or any other Indian, and cited to him the fulfilment of my paying another Indian a balance due by me when I ransomed Lt Helm in Sept. 1812. The next day Gomo told me I could not accomplish my wish, as the Indians had decided on taking all prisoners onto Detroit and deliver them to the British. I again pressed the matter to Gomo, he begged me not to mention anything more on the subject, as it would endanger the prisoners lives. I have no doubt in my mind but that James Corben [h]as stated nothing to you but the truth, as I never heard anything said against the Corbens while they were at Chicago but I cannot say that James Corben was wounded by the Indians at Chicago on the 15th August, 1812, but Mr John Kinsie (my stepbrother) still lives at Chicago and Perish the half-blood³ resides in that vicinity. a letter to Alex. Woolcot [Wolcott] Indian agent at Chicago will be attended to. Lt. L. T. Helm was wounded and [*ms. torn*] on [the] same day (15th August 1812) where he is I do not know, but if living (as he was very much dissipated) he would be able to prove that James Corben was wounded, as he (Helm) remained some days among the Indians at Sandy Creek before I ransomed him — as respects Fielding Corben I never have seen or heard of him since I seen him with the Indians on the 16th August 1812

Any other information that you may want on this or any other subject will be communicated with pleasure from

Your most Obedt and very humble Servt

THOMAS FORSYTH

Mr William Wolden
Woodville Culpeper County
Virginia''

² Gomo was a well-known chief of the Illinois river Pottawatomies, and traditionally a friend of the Americans.

³ Better known as Pierre Leclaire.